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ABSTRACT

Rhetorical studies of film and television arose more or less independently at a number of universities during the 1960s and 1970s. At Cornell University (New York), the accident of a combined speech and drama department gave rise to the study of the rhetoric of film. At the same time, other theorists were approaching film rhetoric from literature. The numbers of graduate theses and dissertations on the rhetoric of film, television, literature, and related subjects grew from a scattering in the 1950s and 1960s to a takeoff in the 1980s and early 1990s. It is clear that rhetoricians have been interested in the rhetoric of the arts since the earliest days of their discipline. Textbook analysis shows that writers no longer see public speaking as the only means of illustrating the range of rhetorical criticism; most at least make gestures toward "media" criticism. Recent rhetoric works by David Bordwell and by Seymour Chatman argue for new directions in the field. They suggest that criticism is not enough, and that the time has come for using critical analysis to extend historical and theoretical understandings. Rather than interpretation, a new mode of historical poetics would involve both attention to the nuances of film experience and criticism responsible to the theoretical positions it applies. (Ten notes are included; 114 references are attached.) (SG)

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Recent Developments in the Rhetorical Study of Film and Television

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Recent Developments in the Rhetorical Study

of Film and Television

Tom Benson

John Wilson has offered each of us a familiar homework assignment--to assess the state of the debate in an area of rhetorical theory and criticism. At the same time, he has given the assignment a paradoxical twist: he asks us to deal with the situation at present. After puzzling over this, I've decided that either I have to define "present" as a fairly long moment--a moment of about 40 years' duration--or I've got to say that the present is a point possessing no dimensions, but rather a moving location in time, and that to deal with the present I'm forced to deal with a bracketed past and future time of about 40 years' duration.

I hope, with a backward and a forward glance, to gain some sense of where we stand at the moment.

I propose this afternoon to take a backward glance at the development of scholarship on film rhetoric in the past thirty or so years--a very brief backward glance--in order to isolate some theoretical and institutional issues. I will describe a small slice of the institutional history of the development of these academic concerns, sketch the changing scope of textbooks devoted to rhetorical criticism, and glance at the development of graduate theses and dissertations on film, television, literature, and related arts.

I will conclude with a discussion of two recent books dealing with rhetoric and the study of film--David Bordwell's Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema and Seymour Chatman's Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film. These books are excellent in their own right, and offer some interesting grounds to stimulate inquiry into questions about the aims of criticism as part of a general inquiry into communication, and the appropriation of "rhetoric" as a

key term in such inquiry.

I hope to address this paper to students and professors in departments of speech, rhetoric, communication, film, English, and related fields who may be working on thesis and dissertation proposals, and who are trying to locate and justify their efforts in the scholarly literature of the discipline. I also hope to interest colleagues who are interested in the historical development of the field of communication studies.

The rhetorical study of film and television has a peculiar history, and, still, a theory struggling for clarity about its most basic frameworks. There is still little agreement about what would constitute a basic bibliography for rhetorical study of film and television. It is clear, however, that in the 1980s, for a variety of reasons, a seemingly irreversible alteration in the scope of rhetorical studies had become established, and that film and television are on the agenda.

For at least some of us who are interested in the rhetorical study of film and television, accidents of time, place, and local academic/administrative structures were almost as important as theoretical considerations in getting us started.

The history of the development of rhetoric of film has yet to be told, and it is certainly a story that has many strands. I have begun lately trying to piece some of it together, but it is clear to me that rhetorical studies of film (and later television) and of literature arose more or less independently at a number of universities during the 1960s and 1970s, and that the development of theory was no more linear than was the development of institutional support for graduate students and faculty venturing into these areas.[1] I would like to try, because it will later in this paper suit my theoretical purposes, to reconstruct something of the early history of rhetoric of film, but I want to offer the caution that I am describing only the history to which I have had access, and am not making any special claim for priority on my own behalf, or on behalf of those whose work I happened to be aware of in the earliest days of our explorations.

For example, those of us who studied rhetoric at Cornell in the late 1950s and early 1960s discovered ourselves in a department of speech and drama. One of the drama professors, Walter Stainton, was interested in film history and criticism, and taught a two-semester course, one on the history of narrative film, the second on documentary. Several students in rhetoric crossed over to take Professor Stainton's courses, and it was natural that we should speculate about whether our rhetorical studies had any application to the study of film. I remember writing a term paper for Stainton on the rhetoric of film, in about 1959 or 1960; at the same time, Jim Wood, who had arrived as a graduate student a couple of years earlier, was working on his own ideas, and eventually wrote a dissertation on the rhetoric of film.

The accident of a combined speech and drama department thus had much to do with creating the opportunity for the hybrid study of rhetoric of film at Cornell. At the same time, the intellectual confidence and generosity of the rhetoric faculty at Cornell made a very big difference. Herbert Wichelns, Carroll Arnold, John Wilson, and others were willing to go against the grain of rhetorical studies in the late fifties and to support their students in an enterprise that was dubious by the standards of the times. Having lived near the development of the changing field of rhetorical studies for more than thirty years, it is fascinating to me to see how the actualities of institutional practice govern intellectual discourse. Thirty years ago, ventures into the rhetorical study of film (and literature) were encouraged, though certainly were seen as digressions from the firm association of rhetorical studies with public address.[2]

The committee system of graduate advising is a remarkable invention. When used with responsibility, it can protect a student from the twin dangers of enforced discipleship to an authoritative advisor, on the one hand, or the rigid imposition of department-wide orthodoxies, on the other hand. The committee system establishes a climate open to innovation, but with a variety of mechanisms to impose a certain caution. The encouragement of rhetorical studies in film and literature in the Cornell

school of rhetoric in my time there was certainly innovative; that innovation was balanced by a countervailing caution--the clear theoretical injunction that "rhetoric" means persuasion in the classical sense, that is, demonstrably intentional and pragmatic use of the "available means of persuasion" to achieve relatively immediate political ends. That Aristotelian phrase, "available means of persuasion," came to be used as a magical talisman to cover a wide variety of intellectual excursions.

Those of us who were coming at the issue from the administrative niche called "speech" were justifying the inclusion of film studies within rhetoric by arguing that film was historically part of the modern "means of persuasion." Our motives were suspected, and probably rightly so: we had found a theoretical justification that satisfied the administrative necessities of territory and turf, but it is probably true that we wanted not simply film as persuasion but film as film to be part of our zone of permissible activity. The "means of persuasion" was our foot in the door.

We were not aware, in those early days, of the work of Wayne Booth, which was coming at the issue of rhetoric from the opposite direction, and which resulted in the publication of his Rhetoric of Fiction in 1961. While we were working to bring film and literature into rhetorical studies, Booth was re-establishing the study of rhetoric within literary theory and criticism. His argument was that "rhetoric" was the proper name for the techniques by which writers made their fictions accessible and effective as literature. He was suspected, of course, of wanting more, of wanting to import all of rhetoric into literature, of wanting to obliterate the distinction between poetic and rhetoric, in which poetry's function is "to be" and rhetoric's is "to do." "In writing about the rhetoric of fiction," Booth began,

> I am not primarily interested in didactic fiction, fiction used for propaganda or instruction. My subject is the technique of non-didactic fiction, viewed as the art of communicating with readers--the rhetorical resources available to the writer of epic, novel, or short story as he tries,

consciously or unconsciously, to impose his fictional world upon the reader.[3]

The two strands of practice, one coming from speech, the other from literature, have in the past twenty-five years to some degree converged, though the distinctions and problems have not altogether collapsed. By the end of the sixties, Wayne Booth's work was widely influential among rhetorical critics generally, and Booth (along with Larry Rosenfield, who sits here with us today) was one of the major presenters at the Wingspread Conference of the National Developmental Project on Rhetoric sponsored by SCA and NEH in 1969-1970. At the Pheasant Run conference that met to consider the Wingspread papers and to prepare a general report to the field, there was a very strong sense of urgency to declare the whole of human symbolic activity as potentially within the scope of rhetorical inquiry. The committee on the scope of rhetoric, and more especially the committee on rhetorical criticism, were cited for the next ten or fifteen years as the legitimating authorities for rhetorical studies of a variety of non-oratorical forms.[4]

Graduate Theses and Dissertations

In doing my homework for this paper, I started looking for theses and dissertations on the rhetoric of film, television, literature, and related subjects. This search is still in a fairly preliminary stage, owing to the problems of incomplete access to data and doubts about what qualifies for inclusion in such a list. Clumsy and incomplete as a search through the computer catalog at Penn State and some other libraries, and a scan of selected keywords in Dissertation Abstracts may be, if we take the items unearthed as even partially representative, the trend is clear: a scattering of work in the 1950s and 1960s; a very small but steady production, at the rate of one or two a year, in the late 1970s; and a takeoff in the 1980s and early 1990s--in the period

1980 through 1991 we have so far found 58 theses and dissertations, and there are almost certainly many more to be found; the period 1950 to 1991 has so far turned up 86 titles.

My impression as I scan through lists of theses and dissertations in rhetoric confirms a phenomenon that Marty Medhurst and I stumbled upon as we were compiling a bibliography of books and journal articles for the 1984 first edition of Rhetorical Dimensions in Media. We found that, contrary to folklore, rhetorical scholars had been interested in rhetoric in the arts from the earliest days of the discipline; at the same time, we discovered to our surprise that there were many fewer close critical studies of orators than we had imagined, given the energetic revolt against such studies that began in the 1960s. There are more studies of rhetoric in the arts and fewer in rhetoric of oratory than one might expect, though in general it is true that, in departments of speech communication over the long haul, studies of oratory seem to outnumber studies of rhetoric in other genres and media. We thought then, and we think now, that historical-critical study of oratory (as well as literature, film, and related arts) is unfinished business and much needed in the discipline.

Textbooks on Rhetorical Criticism

In recent years, it has been common for general textbooks on rhetorical criticism to include at least a gesture toward the legitimacy of "media" criticism--usually criticism of film and television. A glance at a few titles may be instructive. In 1972, the first edition of Robert Scott and Bernard Brock's Methods of Rhetorical Criticism contained some 17 essays describing or exemplifying rhetorical criticism, none of them dealing with film or television. In the second edition (1980), Brock and Scott included the two-essay set by Thomas Frentz and Janice Hocker Rushing on the first of the Rocky films. The third edition, edited by Brock, Scott, and James Chesebro, although it does not offer any film or television criticism as such, greatly broadens the genres and media that are

the subject of its collected essays. Film and television are clearly not, then, obligatory subjects, but public speaking is no longer sufficient to illustrate the range of rhetorical criticism.

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's 1972 Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric is devoted to the study of speeches and essays.

In 1974, Carroll Arnold's book on rhetorical criticism did not include film, television, or other media as exemplary subject matter, but felt it, evidently, useful to include explicit notice of this in the title of his book: Criticism of Oral Rhetoric.

James Andrews's 1983 text on rhetorical criticism, The Practice of Rhetorical Criticism, contains essays that are, in a variety of ways, sensitive to the media contexts of rhetorical messages, but the essays themselves concentrate primarily on spoken and written discourse. The second edition of Andrews's text includes one essay dealing explicitly with media rhetoric: Ernest Bormann's "A Fantasy Theme Analysis of the Television Coverage of the Hostage Release and the Reagan Inaugural."

Sonja Foss's 1989 text, Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice, contains critical essays dealing with speeches, films, popular music, and other forms.

Rod Hart's 1990 survey of rhetorical criticism argues that rhetoric is not necessarily tied to any particular medium, but does insist on rhetoric as intentional persuasion; he says that

> Rhetoric always tells a story with a purpose; the story is never told for its own sake.[5]

Martha Cooper's text, Analyzing Public Discourse, takes a similar view of rhetoric as aimed at shaping opinions about public issues. She bases her own discussion of the scope and nature of rhetoric on the claim of Gerard Hauser that "rhetoric is the management of symbols in order to create social action."[6] Cooper devotes most of her concluding chapter to an analysis of Peter Watkins's 1966 film, The War Game, which she frames as

a case of public argument.

The trend seems clear: textbooks in rhetorical criticism nowadays typically contain at least one extended example, and usually more, of the rhetoric of non-oratorical forms. One textbook for courses in rhetorical criticism specifically asserts that criticism, at least for advanced students, needs to consider a wide range of media artifacts, both as public argument, where that is appropriate, and on their own terms as invitations to "audience engagement," to use Bruce Gronbeck's phrase.[7] But most of the texts cited here, when they do include media within the proper scope of rhetoric, are interested in the public, argumentative dimension of rhetoric, not the broader range of matters that I take to be included in the rhetorics of Kenneth Burke, Wayne Booth, and Dick Gregg.

My impression is that rhetoricians have claimed some new media turf, but that we are too often using tried and true methods of planting, sowing, and harvesting without always considering first whether new techniques and theories may be needed, new and native species discovered in the new lands to which we are extending our investigations.

Although it is now clear that film and television criticism are not only permitted but in many ways seem to be obligatory from the perspective of rhetorical criticism as it is practiced in departments of speech and communication, the reverse is by no means clear. Film and television critics, especially when they are not working in general communication departments, often show no particular concern to name "rhetoric" as among the leading modes of analysis. There are a few exceptions, as in volume 2 of Bill Nichols's Movies and Methods, which includes Nick Browne's essay on " . . . The Rhetoric of Stagecoach" as an example of "structuralist semiotics." One essay on rhetorical criticism of film is included in Nichols's bibliography, under the category of "countercurrents." It also seems clear that the appropriation by rhetoricians of the domain of media artifacts is not symmetrical with the appropriation by film and literary

critics of rhetorical theory. Very few critics and theorists cross back and forth between these two territories.

Bordwell and Chatman: Issues in Recent Theory

I turn finally to two recent books that argue for new directions in the study of film. For the purposes of this paper, I do not propose to try to do justice to the full range of their contributions to communication studies; rather, I will use them to extend our consideration of what we might be teaching our students, and especially how we might advise graduate students to choose topics for theses and dissertations.

David Bordwell's Making Meaning and Seymour Chatman's Coming to Terms both suggest that criticism is not enough, and that the time has come for using critical analysis to extend historical and theoretical understandings.

For the purposes of our context in this paper, there is a sense in which David Bordwell's Making Meaning proposes to do for academic film criticism what Ed Black's Rhetorical Criticism did in the field of speech communication: to make an earlier paradigm for criticism more or less impossible to carry on under its reigning assumptions. Bordwell argues that the practice of academic film criticism is essentially an enterprise in which the critic imputes "meaning" to a film text. This meaning the film critic takes to be either "implicit" in the text of the film, or "symptomatic" of, for example, "repressed social sources and consequences" (73). The interpreter who seeks implicit meanings explicates the text of the film to reveal them, at the same time drawing the reader to share these meanings, whereas the symptomatic critic is, for example, interested in debunking the film by revealing its underlying politics. In both cases, the critic is attempting, says Bordwell, to reveal meanings that are in the text but not obvious; the critic proposes to construct a "reading" of the film that merits publication on the grounds that it is both plausible and novel. The bulk of Bordwell's book consists in laying out the logic and rhetoric of such interpretive practices, after

which he concludes that interpretation, while it dominates the field of academic film criticism, is less interesting than it claims to be. As I understand his objections, they are that interpretive film criticism wrongly supposes meaning, in a thematic sense, to be at the heart of the film experience, and that in any case the meanings proposed are increasingly routine and uninformative. He sums up his charge in this way:

> In sum, contemporary interpretation-centered criticism tends to be conservative and coarse-grained. It tends to play down film form and style. In leans to an unacknowledged degree upon received aesthetic categories without producing new ones. It is largely uncontentious and unreflective about its theories and practices. As if all this weren't enough, it has become boring. (261)

Bordwell proposes, in place of the current interpretive practices, a mode of critical film scholarship for which he suggests the label historical poetics. Such work would be concerned with poetics because it would try to account for the film as experienced without presupposing that experience to be somehow reducible to thematics. The work would be historical because it would try to reconstruct the circumstances under which the film was made and under which it was viewed by its proper audience. I hope that such a program sounds familiar to this audience, because it seems to me to articulate very clearly some of the aspirations of rhetorical criticism of recent times--aims still not altogether realized. His proposal for a historical poetics, therefore, has much to commend it as a way of thinking about how to approach textual criticism--in the film or, I think, in any medium. A historical poetics, offered as one approach to be added to existing approaches, offers the enticing possibility of a text-centered criticism attentive to the rich nuances of the film experience and at the same time a criticism responsible to the theoretical positions it applies and interrogates. Why would anyone object to such a program?

Bordwell has written a tremendously impressive and persuasive book, and he is, I think, faultlessly generous to those with whom he disagrees. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the practice of interpretation, even by the routines that Bordwell criticizes, ought not to be abandoned by the academy, for a variety of reasons. Interpretation, in the sense of the search for meaning, is a core activity of the humanities, and, it seems to me, an essential part of the teaching of the liberal arts. If you will grant that proposition, it seems to me to follow that we require two things: (1) we need a free field in which graduate students can practice the craft of interpretation in their theses and dissertations; and (2) we need a constantly renewed fund of published interpretations that adapt to the appearance of new films and new understandings. The dialogue of such understandings is not concluded with any single interpretation, no matter how persuasive it might be, as, for example, Larry Rosenfield reminded us in his essay on "The Anatomy of Critical Discourse" in 1968. Even if the chief use of such published interpretations were primarily to support classroom instruction (and further academic discourse), it is serving a useful function, if we take our teaching seriously. (I understand that this will be regarded as a very modest claim to make for a body of scholarly discourse; I take it that to regard the claim as modest invites us to consider what we take ourselves to be doing in our classrooms).

There is, perhaps, another angle from which to consider why we will want to be cautious in accepting Bordwell's assessment of the interpretive tradition. I want to be tentative in advancing this argument, but I do offer it for your consideration. Bordwell's objections to what he takes to be traditional interpretive practice are, it seems to me, though persuasive, not what he spends the bulk of his book in fact demonstrating. The body of his book is devoted to revealing the procedures and modes of arguing of interpretive film critics. Such an investigation, while it might imply that all this criticism is fundamentally reducible to a routine, is not in itself a critique of the achievements of such criticism. Any critical practice can be routine and uninformative,

while at the same time a seemingly routinized method can, in the hands of a skilled critic, yield interesting news, as Dick Gregg argues in a recent essay.[8]

Despite these tentative reservations, Bordwell's book will make stimulating reading for graduate students and their mentors, though I hope that it does not lead to a stampede away from critical case studies of particular films, which seem to me a sensible and useful project.

Let me turn briefly to Seymour Chatman's latest book, Coming to Terms. Chatman's subtitle specifically describes his book as being concerned with The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film. In his concluding chapter, on "The 'Rhetoric' 'of' 'Fiction,'" Chatman usefully distinguishes and then relates two senses of "suasion" that constitute the "rhetoric" of fiction--the sausion "to accept the form of the work," and the suasion to accept "a certain view of how things are in the real world."[9]

Chatman devotes his opening chapters to generic issues, comparing narration with two other text types--description and argument--and exploring some of the ways in which such types may be combined in a single text, and with what effect. The issue of text types reappears in an extended consideration of the relations of film and the novel, centered on a critical study of the adaptation of The French Lieutenant's Woman. Most of the remainder of the book is concerned with a set of issues centering on the rhetorical function of "narrator," "implied author," and "point of view," each of which concepts he tries to reformulate and extend, building on Wayne Booth's work and his own earlier book, Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film.

Where Bordwell's book proposes a "historical poetics," Chatman's implicitly proposes a "theoretical rhetoric" as a useful ground for inquiry into how filmic and literary narratives induce response. Chatman's careful mid-level theorizing might well serve as a model for other scholars as to how to grapple with the relation of theory building and the critical case study.[10] I think it is even more likely that, following Chatman's model, graduate student writers might be able to borrow Chatman's

theoretical terminology and put it to use with films other than the ones he chooses as his test cases.

Conclusion

This has been a rambling excursion over the topic of where we now are in the rhetorical study of film and television. We have noted some institutional and theoretical issues current at the beginnings of the rhetorical study of film.

Our backward glance at the development of these interests suggests that there is a vigorous line of research underway, and that graduate students have a wide field of activity before them, in case studies of thematics and explicit or implied argumentation in film; in the sort of non-didactic rhetorics defined by Booth and in the historical poetics suggested by Bordwell; and in the theoretically guided critical case studies modeled by Chatman.

Notes

I am grateful to Hong Cheng, whose work as my research assistant provided some of the items in the bibliography.

[1] I do not wish to suggest that rhetorical study of the arts sprang up out of nowhere in the late 1950s; such studies have a centuries-old tradition. In American rhetorical studies in the twentieth century, there have been since the earliest days journal articles and graduate theses on rhetoric and the arts. For the development of literary approaches, see especially Edward P. J. Corbett, ed., Rhetorical Analyses of Literary Works (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969). Other aspects of this history are described in Martin J. Medhurst and Thomas W. Benson, "Rhetorical Studies in a Media Age," in Medhurst & Benson, eds., Rhetorical Dimensions in Media (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1984); Thomas W. Benson, "History, Theory, and Criticism in the Study of American Rhetoric," in Benson, ed., American Rhetoric: Context and Criticism (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1989).

[2] I should record here my appreciation for John Wilson, Carroll Arnold, and Walter Stainton for their patience with my attempts to write a master's thesis in the rhetoric of literature, which eventually resulted in "A Rhetorical Analysis of Invention and Disposition in Upton Sinclair's The Jungle" (M.A. thesis, Cornell University, 1961).

[3] Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), preface.

[4] The reports may be found in Lloyd Bitzer and Edwin Black, eds., The Prospect of Rhetoric (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

[5] Roderick P. Hart, Modern Rhetorical Criticism (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1990), 9.

[6] Martha Cooper, Analyzing Public Discourse (Prospect Heights: Waveland, 1989), 12; quoting Gerard Hauser, Introduction to Rhetoric (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 3.

[7] The text referred to is Martin Medhurst & Thomas W. Benson, eds., Rhetorical Dimensions in Media. Gronbeck's analysis of "Audience Engagement in Family" is included in Rhetorical Dimensions.

[8] Richard B. Gregg, "The Criticism of Symbolic Inducement: A Critical-Theoretical Connection," in Thomas W. Benson, ed., Speech Communication in the 20th Century (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 41-62.

[9] Chatman, Coming to Terms, 203.

[10] Other studies in a similar vein, exploring in close readings the uses of particular cinematic forms, include: Edward Branigan, Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film (Berlin: Mouton, 1984); Bruce Kawin, Mindscreen: Bergman, Godard, and First-Person Film (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Sarah Kozloff, Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

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